Stress and diabetes - understanding the link



Most people know at least a bit about the negative impact prolonged stress can have on the body. But stress and its connection to type 2 diabetes? For many of us, this link may not be top of mind. While stress isn't a direct cause of diabetes, it can contribute to other factors that can lead to it. For those already diagnosed with diabetes, stress can create further complications.

The Dangers of Stress

The human body sees stress as a danger and reacts with a "fight-or-flight" response. Basically, the body responds to stress by getting energy from fat and glucose (sugar) stored in its cells.

The first reaction: With a hectic workday, you may be "running on adrenalin." Your stress response releases hormones such as cortisol and adrenalin. Though these hormones help increase your energy levels to deal with the stressful situation at hand, they also raise blood sugar levels.

What happens next: When blood sugar levels become higher, the pancreas tries to lower those levels again by creating insulin. After removing the sugar from the blood, insulin acts as a "key" that opens the cell to store the sugar as energy.

A different reaction: Stress is especially difficult for people living with type 2 diabetes because they don't produce enough insulin in response to elevated levels of blood sugar, making it more difficult for their body to keep blood sugar balanced.

Though you may not be able to prevent stress from creeping into your life, you can choose how you respond to it.

Reducing Your Risk for Type 2 Diabetes

As with any illness, type 2 diabetes does have risk factors. These include:

Age. Most people diagnosed with type 2 diabetes are over the age of 40. Why? Because your body typically produces less insulin as you get older.

Weight. If you're overweight or obese—especially if you carry the excess weight around your mid-section—you're more likely to develop diabetes.

A sedentary lifestyle. While there isn't a direct link between "couch potatoes" and type 2 diabetes, the less physically active you are, the more likely you are to be overweight or obese. In fact, one Harvard School of Public Health study found that the risk of developing type 2 diabetes was nearly triple for men who spent more than 40 hours watching TV weekly compared to those who watched TV less than one hour a week.

High cholesterol, blood pressure and/or heart disease. None of these conditions are good news, but they can also increase your risk for developing type 2 diabetes.

Family history. If anyone in your family (usually a parent, brother or sister) had or has type 2 diabetes, you have a higher risk of developing it too.

Watch for these signs: If you've been feeling extra tired and thirsty all the time, have lost weight without trying or are urinating frequently, make an appointment with your doctor for a type 2 diabetes screening. Even if you don't have these symptoms, the Canadian Diabetes Association recommends you ask your doctor to screen for diabetes at the age of 40 and at least every three years after that.

Managing Type 2 Diabetes

While type 2 diabetes can be challenging, the good news is that you can keep it well-managed and minimize its damaging effects with a little effort and resolve to lead a healthier, less-stressed life. Be sure to:

Commit to healthy lifestyle choices. Skip fat, sugar and salt-laden fast foods and pack a healthy, diabetic-friendly lunch for work. Do a quick search online for diabetic meals and you'll find an array of recipes to choose from! Positive food changes won't just help you stabilize your blood sugar levels; they'll also help keep your weight at a healthy level. Also, if you've been prescribed medication, be sure to take it as instructed.

Get moving. Exercise not only lowers stress levels, it can also help you maintain a healthy weight. Hate the idea of hitting the gym? Snap on a pedometer and go for a fast-paced walk during your break, take the stairs instead of the elevator or get off a few bus stops early to pack more movement into your day. Whatever you do, avoid long periods of sitting.

"De-clutter" life stresses and relax. Your stress hormones are meant to react to short-term stresses, such as dealing with difficult people, tight schedules, or intense meetings. Constant stress can produce dangerous long-term blood sugar level elevation. If your workload is overwhelming, ask for help. Constantly stressed out by your commute? Consider taking public transit or car-pooling to lighten the load. Look into relaxation tapes, information on meditation or join a yoga class. All can help you remain cool and keep stress levels at bay.

Socialize to de-stress. Meet with co-workers, friends, or even take a night class to get your mind off daily stresses and connect with fun and interesting people.

Take a deep breath. When stress feels overwhelming, take a moment and "breathe." This can be especially helpful during moments of great stress and anxiety.

Get professional support if you feel your stress levels are becoming unmanageable. Contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program or your doctor to connect with a professional who can provide you with solid strategies to manage your stress.

Whether or not you have diabetes, everyone can benefit from lower stress levels. Arming yourself with knowledge and staying on top of risk factors can go a long way to reducing your chances of developing type 2 diabetes or, if already diagnosed, keeping it under control.

Measuring Type 2 Diabetes

In 2009, more than 50 percent of the Canadian population with type 2 diabetes was aged 25-64

- Every year, over 60,000 new cases of type 2 diabetes will be diagnosed
- Adults can reduce their risk for type 2 diabetes by over 50 percent by exercising frequently and losing a moderate amount of weight.